

A Regime Analysis: Evidence from Sri Lankan Migrant Domestic Workers' Journeys to Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I use qualitative methods to examine the concept of a regime for migrant care based on Sri Lankan women's transnational mobility as migrant domestic workers to Saudi Arabia. My work thus contributes to the growing body of literature on migrant care regimes from a Global South perspective, which to date has still received insufficient scholarly attention. The Sri Lanka–Saudi migrant care regime, shaped by a transnational consciousness of the possibilities for accumulation and production through reproductive labour, is located at a convergence of “translocal” gender, care, employment and migration systems. The regime is (re)produced through the relations and tensions between the family, the state and the market in an interchange of the dynamics of capitalist market forces and structural relations on various levels. The colour “brown” has emerged as a new racial classification in the global domestic sector, where power and subjectivity are constantly evolving. I argue that domestic work, which continues to be constructed as “women's work”, represents an embodiment both of the subordination of women and of their personal autonomy. This, in turn, has broader implications for the meaning of feminine/masculine, motherhood/fatherhood, home and work.

KEYWORDS

paid domestic labour; migrant domestic workers; care regime; Saudi Arabia; Sri Lanka

Introduction

Over the past few decades, in a global context of economic neo-liberalism and labour market flexibilisation, care regimes worldwide have been increasingly commoditised, defamilised and foreignised. In this context women, primarily from less-developed countries, are increasingly on the move, filling growing care deficits in private households in more-developed or affluent countries in a globally interconnected world. At the receiving end, these migrant workers substitute upper- and middle-class women who have freed themselves from the burden of unpaid reproductive labour under the auspices of global capitalism. This “international transfer of caretaking” (Parrenas, 2000: 561) represents an embodiment of a complex interaction between distinct yet simultaneously interconnected and competing “translocal” systems of gender, care, labour and migration. Together, these systems form what can be considered the institution of the migrant care regime that defines the organisation and corresponding practices and rules of performing migrant care work (Esping-Anderson, 1990). The migrant care regime and the different categorisations of domestic labour that come along with it – that is, paid and unpaid domestic labour that occurs at the interconnections between the private and public spheres – apparently challenge the presumed essentialised notions of gender, the category of women and women's experiences. In this way, the migrant care regime can be simultaneously empowering and

disempowering for women.

Given this situation, in this article I examine the phenomenon of the migrant care regime based on Sri Lankan women moving as live-in migrant domestic workers (MDWs) to Saudi Arabia, which represents a significant and unique flux of paid domestic labour within the Global South.¹ I do this by using qualitative methods based on my direct personal interviews with MDWs, Saudi employers and Sri Lanka's consular staff in Saudi Arabia, who constitute major players in the migrant care regime. Accordingly, this article is an attempt to unravel an empirical puzzle in the sense of: "What is a migrant care regime?" and "How is it constructed?", where that regime is co-produced and co-performed by different actors through various rules, practices and power relations. This Sri Lanka–Saudi care migration has not previously been explored in the context of the migrant care regime, and certainly not based on primary data sources such as the ones that I used. This is the setting for the central contribution of this article to extant migration and regime scholarship, through which I make an open-ended and suggestive attempt to fill the gap in current research.

This article is structured as I now explain. I open the next section with a review of what the literature has to say about the phenomenon of the migrant care regime and its constitution; then I move on to consider the under-examined migrant care arrangements in the Global South. This is followed by an account of my research methods. The section after that is devoted to analysing the home as a workplace and the domestic employer–employee contractual relationship. In this section, I discuss how migrant domestic work (un)settles the fixed assumptions about social categories and relations of power in the Sri Lanka–Saudi migrant care regime. There then ensues a section on the legal and political governance of the regime; here, I discuss how institutional constraints intersect with structural inequalities to intensify women's precarity during the course of migration. In the final section, I wrap up what has been discussed in the article: that the migrant care regime has contradictory effects, both reinforcing women's subordination and providing them with avenues for autonomy.

Literature Review

Push and pull factors

Migrant domestic work is a result of the ever-widening development gaps between the countries of origin and those of destination in a neo-liberal governmentality where political problems are cast in market terms with new levels of autonomy, consumerism, regulation and control (Schechter, 2010; Dunn, 2017). As Lutz (2018: 579) points out, a common element in all migrant care work is an initial situation in which workers from relatively poor countries move into households in more prosperous countries and thus form part of a global labour flow of commodified care. This, in part, results from the extreme living conditions in the countries of origin, such as poverty, inequality and unemployment, which encourage women to enter the global care market. At the same time, it explains the enduring transformations that have emerged within private households in the countries of destination, as more and more women are becoming wage workers accompanied by the

¹ The term Global South, when not simplistically used in terms of geography or as a post-Cold-War alternative to the Third World, has the potential to productively capture a deterritorialised geography of capitalism's externalities and aims to account for "subalterns" within economic Norths in the geographic South and economic Souths in the geographic North (Mahler, 2017: 1). The Global South is, therefore, not an entity that exists per se but it is something that is imagined, (re)created and maintained by the ever-changing positionalities of social actors and institutions (Kloß, 2017: 1).

progressive dismantling of state welfare systems.

The promise of lucrative employment that modern capitalism offers, in circumstances of an ever-weakening welfare state, has therefore pushed women into the labour market, creating a crisis of care that plays profitability and care off against each other (Dowling, 2021). Women's entry into the labour market has thus placed strain on the familistic welfare regime: an ideology of family care in which the family is the main provider of care, with women, not men, being expected to take responsibility for the care and welfare of the family. Women's labour market participation has therefore challenged the contemporary relevance of the conservative domestic gender regime that limits the role of women to family caregiving and, in so doing, promotes the image of a "good" mother sanctioned by the patriarchal framing of motherhood. Furthermore, capitalism itself has provided the answer to this crisis of care inherent in capitalist society in the form of a care economy, fostering the conception of care as a commodity (Leonard and Fraser, 2016; Marchetti, Cherubini and Geymonat, 2021:12). The resultant care economy has enabled some women to avoid a "second shift" and to transfer a significant share of their caring responsibilities to other women, primarily from developing countries, in a scenario in which men continue to remain distant from the reproductive realm.

Migrant care regime

The migrant care regime depicts the submission of care to market dependency. Encouraged by neo-liberal welfare state restructuring that led the way for women to increase their presence in the labour market² and corresponding changes in the gendered organisation of family and private life, the migrant care regime reconstitutes, reorganises and reconstrues care as a truly discrete product that is traded at a translocal level. The commodity of care is subject to the logics of the market, combined with those of the family, profession and the state in and between the countries of origin and those of destination (Aulenbacher, Leiblfinger and Prieler, 2020). The contemporary migrant care regime therefore envelops an ongoing interaction between the translocal systems of gender, care, labour and migration. While the patterns, choices and outcomes of labour migration are not gender-neutral (Ferrant et al., 2014), migration itself creates different gender roles and care arrangements (Walby and Shire, 2022). The migrant care regime thus challenges the traditional limitation of gender and care to the family, showing how they are constituted by multiple transnational institutional domains, such as the market economy and polity (Walby and Shire, 2022: 16). In this way, women's lives have become constructed in and constrained by different temporalities (Acedera and Yeoh, 2019) – origin, destination and transit – and by different domains – public and private, national and transnational, and formal and informal.

The migrant care regime thus distinguishes the category of women – as Alarcón (1990: 360) eloquently argues, "enabling women to become women in opposition to other women" – along different, albeit constitutive, systems of difference: in an interchange of the dynamics of market forces and structural relations (such as gender, class, race, nationality and immigrant status), as well as in the distinctions between mobility and immobility. It shows how household responsibilities are (re)organised among women who are connected across the world through care work, via what Hochschild (2000: 131) calls "global care chains" which reinforce unfair power dynamics in a continued under-valorisation of care work in a larger global political economy. The migrant care regime is therefore a product of a constant power struggle between different agents who, from

² A phenomenon which has also been encouraged by waves of feminism striving for greater economic, political and cultural freedom and equality for women.

their positioning in the disposition of power, construct and give meaning to care mobility through behaviour, categorisation and regimentation (Rass and Wolff, 2018: 51).

Care migrations in the Global South: some insights from Sri Lanka–Saudi care migration

For decades, women from socio-economically challenged locations in Sri Lanka have filled the gaps in reproductive labour in affluent private households in Saudi Arabia, thereby forming a symbiotic relationship between the two nations. While migrant domestic workers from Sri Lanka have become indispensable in private Saudi homes in their transition to a modernised, affluent lifestyle built on oil riches, the remittances sent home by those same MDWs have become an increasingly important source of national funding and a driver of progress in contemporary Sri Lanka, perhaps more than ever considering the country's ongoing economic crisis and struggle for recovery. In fact, care migration in the Global South has become an increasingly significant factor of economic and social development in many developing countries in the area. It highlights a developing-to-developing migration path as opposed to the developing-to-developed path on which much of global care migration has been theorised. Nevertheless, the Global South is highly heterogeneous historically and today in terms of, for example, its welfare regimes (for example, Sri Lanka as a social democratic welfare state compared to Saudi Arabia as an authoritarian welfare state), wealth and migratory patterns, all of which shape care migration regimes in the Global South (Kofman and Raghuram, 2012: 411, 418). The migrant care regime as a concept therefore brings significant value to exploration of the Global South and its diverse care migrations which show the more complex, stratifying effects of contemporary globalisation.

In the vibrant and variegated Global South, Sri Lanka–Saudi Arabia care migration signifies a loaded cross-cultural discourse of paid reproductive labour located in the South – one that involves clashes, resistance, adaptations and modifications in culturally coded systems of gender, care, labour and migration, between the two countries and within each of them. It highlights the multiple characterisations of care migrations in the South, given the varying dimensions of gender, class, race and ethnicity/nationality, religion and so on in each case and, according to Kofman and Raghuram (2012: 418, 423), also the different inheritances from colonialism, postcolonial economics, political transition and recent socio-economic changes within which care migrations are embedded. Nevertheless, less attention has been paid to care migration regimes in the Global South than to care migration regimes in the Global North, which have been reiteratively theorised and favoured as representing the “universal” experience of paid care.

This article therefore underlines the South's continued struggles against capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy: the threefold domination that has been legitimated by the power-knowledge privileged by the epistemologies of the North for many centuries (Santos and Meneses, 2020).

Research Methods

In this article I offer a qualitative, post-structuralist analysis of the phenomenon of the migrant care regime based on Sri Lankan women's mobility as MDWs to Saudi Arabia. The care flow represents an extensive and continuous mobility of paid household labour, shaped by the intersection of gender, care, labour and migration regimes in and between the two countries. The Sri Lanka–Saudi migrant care regime therefore engages a multiplicity of voices, often contradictory and inconclusive, and hence conflicting relations of power, through which the regime is constructed and construed. I apply an interpretive approach to understanding these different power

dynamics in the constitution of the regime, appealing to how people construct reality based on their everyday experiences in different contexts – origin, transit and destination. As such, I differentiate and advance the current discourse on migrant care regimes beyond the “Filipino experience” that has often served as the baseline for the narrative of migrant domestic work in the Global South.

I collected data in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in March 2020, using qualitative fieldwork methods: in-person conversational interviews and observation. The fieldwork focused on three different groups of participants: live-in Sri Lankan MDWs, Saudi employers of Sri Lankan MDWs and Sri Lankan consular officers based in Riyadh; I conducted thirteen, nine and six interviews with these participant groups, respectively. The interviews were conducted in Sinhalese,³ English and Arabic: Sinhalese with the Sri Lankan MDWs, both Sinhalese and English with the diplomatic agents, and English and Arabic with the employers. The Embassy’s professional interpreters were used to conduct the interviews as required. In addition, field observation in public, semi-public and private spaces – such as entrance halls, airports, markets, restaurants, residential neighbourhoods and streets – provided me with important field data. I took extensive field notes, which provided an important written record of my observations. The data analysis was based on thematic and narrative inquiry; the former involved identifying and examining common themes or patterns across the data, while the latter entailed systematically interpreting the ways in which the participants gave meaning to their lives through narratives.

The Workplace and the Employer–Employee Relationship

In this section, I examine how migrant domestic work has repositioned the private Saudi home as an (a)typical workplace, and the consequences of this for the category of women and women’s experiences in the contextual specificity of the Sri Lanka–Saudi migrant care regime.

The contextual specificity of the Sri Lanka–Saudi migration circuit

The movement of Sri Lankan women to Saudi Arabia in search of paid domestic work should be understood in a context of national and global inequalities along economic, social and political lines. Sri Lanka is a Third World country with a welfare state that predates independence from the British in 1948. It is characterised by extreme rural poverty,⁴ a significantly low participation of women in the workforce⁵ and high unemployment rates.

The feminisation of poverty is thus a puzzling development in a context of women’s consistently exceptional educational achievements over the years.⁶ With a welfare state that provides universal free education and healthcare, the poor socio-economic status and labour market performance of women prompts critical reconsideration of welfare policies and oft-touted achievements in terms of gender equality indicators. Within this context and following economic liberalisation reforms in 1977, high unemployment and socio-economic poverty among

³ The mother tongue of the Sinhalese (ethnic majority) in Sri Lanka.

⁴ In Sri Lanka, the rural sector accounts for nearly 78 per cent of the population and over 82 per cent of national poverty (Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka [DCS], 2018: vi, 43).

⁵ The female labour force participation rate in Sri Lanka has been stagnant at around 35 per cent over the past two decades (DSC, 2020).

⁶ For example, the literacy rate of Sri Lankan women is currently around 92 per cent (DCS, 2017: 53), a remarkable indicator of gender equality by both international and regional standards.

Sri Lankan women have led to large numbers of them venturing into the Middle East as MDWs in socio-economically privileged private households.

Saudi Arabia has represented a major destination for Sri Lankan MDWs since the early 1980s. Currently, Saudi Arabia accounts for nearly 20 per cent of Sri Lanka's total reproductive labour exports (Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment [SLBFE], 2020), encouraged by two landmark developments within Saudi society. First, rapidly growing Arabian oil revenues following the international oil crisis of 1973 have meant that many Saudi women can afford the convenience of private MDWs in the transition to a modernised, affluent lifestyle in an increasingly globalised world. Given the oil wealth and the "progress" that has come with it, women in Saudi Arabia have freed themselves from the burden of unpaid and unproductive domestic labour by transferring it to women from less privileged transnational backgrounds, with women from Sri Lanka being top of the list. As such, Saudi women's conspicuous dismissal of social reproductive labour backed by oil riches can be viewed in terms of a feminist struggle for greater freedom and equality; nevertheless, it has only been so for Saudi women. Thus "Saudi feminism" takes after "white feminism" and fails to recognise the struggles and oppression of "other" counterparts in the Global South: their MDWs.

Second, Saudi Arabia has recently started to experience growing participation of women in the workforce, leading to the formation of dual-earner/dual-career family households. Encouraged by so-called Saudisation, a concept introduced in 2003, the aim of which is to absorb more and more Saudi men and women into the workplace and thereby ease unemployment, Saudi Arabia is seeing many women enter the national workforce. Saudi women's increased labour market participation and the accompanying struggles around combining mothering with paid work, significantly correlate with the growing demand for MDWs, who fill the domestic care deficit in a scenario where Saudi men continue to be absent from the reproductive sphere. These migrant labour inputs therefore show how migration patterns in Saudi Arabia have been (re)structured following the oil revenue boom as a means of producing an eminently exploitable reserve army of labour for work that locals would rather not perform (Withers, 2019: 420). Thus, we see an economic North in the geographic South seeking to appropriate labour surplus value of peripheral counterparts in the South (Withers, 2019).

MDWs in a transnational division of reproductive labour

The entry of MDWs into the Saudi reproductive labour market has replaced the woman-in-the-family care model by the migrant-(woman)-in-the-family paradigm. It involves a "transnational transfer of reproductive labour" from one woman to another in a privatised trade arrangement, which nonetheless continues to exploit women's naturalised sense of obligation to be carers (Parrenas, 2000). The gendered structure of family care has thus remained principally intact in the sense of the caregiver-care receiver dyad, although introducing some new meaning and shape to the traditional arrangement of family care and the place of women in it. Corresponding changes have occurred in the structure of care at the base of the care chain, in the family homes of the MDWs, whose absence has both replaced and displaced family care.

What follows are narratives from the field, recounting the institutional construction of gender stereotypes, and thereby the patriarchal framing of women's domestication and the everyday perpetration of symbolic violence as naturalised elements of the gender contract in a transnational economy, which tends to exploit the unproblematised view of "women's work".

MDW-1 was a 70-year-old Sinhalese Buddhist. She moved to Saudi Arabia under three different contracts, the last in 2000. Since 2000, she has not once visited her family in Sri Lanka.

She emotionally recalled and at times regretted her years of domestic work with her last employer:

I raised five children. They are all grown-ups now. They went to America for their studies. ... I would get up at four in the morning and work until around midnight. I did everything around the house – cooking, cleaning, laundry, cleaning bathrooms and toilets and all that. There was not enough time for my work. ... I would go to school with the children, go shopping and even to the hospital with them. ... They [the employer's family] bought me everything I needed – clothes, even soap and shampoo. I was treated like a family member.

E-1 was a male Saudi Muslim employer who visited the Sri Lankan Embassy with his Sri Lankan MDW to apply for a renewal of her passport. He enthusiastically and candidly spoke of his family's affectionate and trusting relationship with the MDW, who had been working for them for the previous eight years:

She is very much like a family member, very loyal. She is part of my family ... actually more than family. My youngest son treats her like his own mom and she treats him like her own son. The trust is there. The win-win situation is there. She is happy, we are happy. When she returns to her family in Sri Lanka on holiday, she always brings him toys ... so my wife would also take her shopping and buy toys for her son and send them back with her.

SLCO/SA-1, a senior consular officer, commented on Sri Lankan MDWs and the type and extent of their domestic work in Saudi Arabia as follows:

Socially, it [migrant domestic work] is a part of their [Saudis'] culture ... way of life. ... These domestic workers usually do whatever their employers tell them to do. Some even wash their cars, on top of cleaning, looking after children, cooking and all that. They do everything around the house.

We can see that paid reproductive labour has turned Sri Lankan MDWs into surrogate mothers and caregivers in the Saudi family home, whose “maternal love” is nevertheless secured via exchange, reciprocity and redistribution embedded in the principles of the market economy. Yet, it is not void of fondness and sentiment (Silvey, 2006: 23). The employment relations between the MDWs and Saudi employers provoke an emotional discourse of maternal instinct, affection, intimacy and loyalty, ascribing a family-like feeling and sentiment to it.

Nonetheless, the emotions carry gendered political significance, regulating gendered propriety and morality of caring and caregiving and thus the productive subordination of MDWs within the Saudi reproductive realm. In terms of the culture-specific standards of domestic caregiving, the Sri Lankan MDWs fit well into the Saudi modality of “desirable” MDWs – a classification which oversimplifies and downplays the forms of structural and capitalist exploitation characteristic of the home as a living replica of global inequalities. The family-like relationships forged between the MDWs and Saudi employers embody shared cultural standards of behaviour, conceptualising what “family” means to them and the dimensions of closeness and distance as indicative of the emotional intensity of the relationship. That said, family is a locus of gender, class and political struggle that feeds into women's oppression and marginalisation. The MDWs are considered neither as “real” workers nor “one of the family”, thus complicating their sense of self and place in the Saudi family home, within which family is open to varying interpretations.

The oversupply of care in Saudi domesticity through importing MDWs has been brought about at the expense of the MDWs and their significant others who stay behind. In Sri Lanka, a nation built on conventional gender and care regimes that maintain a strong male-breadwinner

model, women's entry into the transnational labour market and their absence from the home for extended periods of time have disrupted the household trajectories and plans (Gamburd, 2020: 187). Moreover, within a masculine crisis of survival, with the country resorting to the commodification of reproductive labour as a survival strategy, gender-specific identities have become unsettled, resulting in unhealthy tension between private lives and public policy. This has produced a situation of constant negotiation, resistance and bargaining over the years.

Migrant domestic work has led to women adopting unconventional methods of mothering and caring at both ends of the care chain. At the receiving end, female Saudi employers split their maternal obligations with their MDWs, freeing themselves from much of the burden of unpaid, unproductive domestic labour; and at the sending end, the MDWs transfer their maternal obligations to female relatives within the extended family (for example, mothers and sisters), who provide the glue to hold the transnationally split family household together. In such circumstances, the MDWs experimented with different versions of mothering in the sense that maternal love and obligation is performed through material endowments and daily communication over mobile and digital technologies. Mothering, motherly love and mother-child relationships have thus been increasingly defined in terms of economic value and audio-visual exchanges.

The Sri Lanka-Saudi migrant care regime thus sees domestic work passed on from one woman to another across transnational borders, creating transnational care chains (Hochschild, 2000), or what Parrenas (2000: 561) calls, a "three-tier transfer of reproductive labour". Domestic work, be it paid or unpaid, thus continues to remain a women's affair.

Nonetheless, the women in the care chain have very different social standing and so does the value of domestic work, which varies along the chain: the market price effects a difference in value between paid and unpaid domestic work, otherwise comparable, with the former afforded greater economic and social value than the latter. On the other hand, the translocal care chains are also a worrisome indication of the lack of state provision of care at both ends of the care chain, which maintains, rather than challenges, the existing structures and structural inequalities.

Re-differentiating the category of "women" in domesticity

In the Saudi home, migrant domestic work forms a contractual relationship between two women, at once connected and divided along structural lines. On the one hand, they are connected by gender, placing themselves within the broader gendered obligation to care for the family. On the other hand, they are divided by unequal axes of power, such as class, race, nationality, religion, immigrant/citizenship status and *kafala*. *Kafala* is an endemic law exclusive to the Middle Eastern temporary migrant labour market that further stratifies, problematises and differentiates the maid-mistress relationship in Saudi domesticity. As a private sponsorship scheme, *kafala* governs MDWs' entry, residence, work and exit from Saudi Arabia, exclusively tying their work and residency status to individual employers, called *kafeels*. *Kafala* thus enables a system of unfree labour; in turn, unfree labour entails (re)production of stereotypical and essentialising bodies of knowledge about MDWs (Carstensen, 2021: 2), often connected to workers' exploitation, dehumanisation and degradation. These are phenomena that are firmly tethered to the legacy of slavery and enslavement in the Middle East. As such, each social division has a different ontological basis irreducible to others, thus systematically differentiating between various kinds of difference (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 195-199). This being the case, the Sri Lanka-Saudi migrant care regime presents an instructive example of sameness as much as of difference in the complex organisation of paid reproductive labour.

What follows are personal accounts from the field, elucidating the interconnectedness of different socio-political identities that create overlapping systems of discrimination and privilege in

the domestic sphere: an (a)typical workplace where two categories of women are at once related and unrelated.

MDW-2 was a 57-year-old unmarried Sinhalese Buddhist. She had been unpaid and over-kept by her employer without being allowed to return to Sri Lanka since her contract started in 2004. During her sixteen-year-long stay, she had not received her monthly salary for twelve years and six months. Eventually, her employer transferred her to a friend's house for domestic work. She worked there for five months, after which, on her request, the new employer dropped her off at the Sri Lankan Embassy in Riyadh. There she was awaiting her salary arrears and the chance to finally to return home after sixteen years of virtual servitude:

Baba was willing to pay my salary, but *mama* didn't let him.⁷ She just kept on putting it off, like tomorrow, the day after. She would say, 'What's the rush?' and so on, and went on like that for twelve years. However, their children adored me. When they would go shopping, they would always bring me something or give me the change to keep.

E-2 was a male Saudi Muslim employer who visited the Sri Lankan Embassy with his Sri Lankan MDW to renew her two-year work contract. He described his preference for Sri Lankan MDWs as follows:

Arabic speech is very important. Appearance in terms of 'brown skin' [he pointed at the MDW sitting behind him] is important. [He jeeringly expressed his dislike for MDWs from an African background because of their 'black' skin colour.] Age, experience, training and a low salary are equally important.

SLCO/SA-1, quoted above, and SLCO/SA-2, a senior female consular officer, collectively commented on the topic as follows:

The Saudis say the most effective and attractive are the Filipinas. They speak English. Yes, skin colour also matters. ... you know, MDWs from African countries, they simply don't care. They would even beat their employers if they had to.

They [MDWs] have no rights in Saudi Arabia. No protection under any ILO, IOM⁸ or any other Convention ... Saudi Arabia has not signed any. ... they have only started to look into the situation. ... we cannot talk about decent work for MDWs, their working hours or whatever. Decent work is a very nice word, but we cannot apply it to domestic work.

Sri Lankan women's placement as MDWs in private Saudi homes creates new structural inequalities while reinforcing the old ones that characterise the enduring maid–mistress relationship. The modern Saudi home contests the gendered convention of the home as a domain within which femininity and feminine subjectivity are nurtured. On the contrary, it is an intensely political space within which hegemonic femininities are at work, reproducing a matrix of oppression over "other" women, while complementing the masculinist production of gender and gendered subjectivity. Saudi housewives raised to be *kafeels* and mistresses exercise an arbitrary power over MDWs, justified by the (un)equal structural relations between them combined with the dynamics of market forces. Such Saudi *mamas* control and define the MDWs' choices and conditions of work, if not the whole of their lives, body and bodily emotions, rendering a condition of "unfreedom" – a state of

⁷ MDWs habitually call female employers *mama* and male employers *baba*.

⁸ ILO = International Labour Organization; IOM = International Organization for Migration.

arbitrary interference with MDWs' liberty of action and right to life (Foucault, 1984). Unfreedom in work is therefore an inescapable reality in the politics of domestic labour in the Sri Lanka–Saudi migrant care regime, where *kafala* embodies a form of indentured labour in a synchrony of modern and pre-modern production in the twenty-first century.

Race, specifically being brown, constitutes a unique maid–mistress power relationship in the Saudi home. Racial identity forms a common denominator of both “oneness” and “otherness”. According to Bonilla-Silva (2015: 81), brown racial identity is profoundly influenced by different and non-mainstream classifications of social relations between intermediate collectives – that is, social groups that defy straightforward racial classification – non-white/non-black but in-between – occupying different positions in the racial hierarchy; in other words, they are people who are racialised along religious and ethnonational lines rather than strictly according to phenotype (Zopf, 2017: 178). Therefore, intertwined with differences based on class, nationality, religion, language and immigrant/citizenship status, being brown is simultaneously growing and declining in importance in Saudi domesticity. This creates different “hues of brownness”, seeing mistresses and maids at once as connected and disconnected through racial identity. Concerning the problem of the colour line, the collective positioning of both mistresses and maids therefore infers cultural and social superiority to “black” (and perhaps inferiority to “white”). Thus, being brown has become an effective basis of tolerance and intolerance in the Saudi care market, in which the colour line signifies a real and effective cause of discrimination and inequality.

On the other hand, the simultaneity of sameness and difference between the Sri Lankan maid and Saudi mistress along the colour line signifies a (de)colonisation of brown racial identity in Saudi home spaces. The narrative of the Saudi mistress speaks of the emergence of a new class or new racial order in the peripheral backyard of the archaic imperial landscape, which has been currently elevated to economic Norths in the geographic South under the auspices of global capitalism. Understandably, the emergence of alternative centres of power creates alternative peripheries. In this way, the narrative of the Sri Lankan maid reflects the creation of new racial subjects in a polycentric capitalist world order where power and subjectivity are in flux; racist and racialising practices are constantly reproduced, challenged and disrupted. The postcolonial economies of Sri Lanka and Saudi Arabia, as Miraftab (2009: 45), referring to Steve Biko (1978), insists, thus signify that the liberation of the colonies could happen only through a new consciousness looking at the (racial) “other”.

The Sri Lanka–Saudi migrant care regime embodies different structural categories of MDWs. Each category is assumed to demonstrate certain physical, cultural and behavioural traits that affect the type and quality of the reproductive labour supplied (Yeates, 2012: 143). This being the case, in the hierarchy of MDWs, Sri Lankans are positioned below their light brown, English-speaking Filipina counterparts, who are favourably construed as modern, Westernised caregivers capable of light/soft work around the house. In contrast, the dark brown Sri Lankans are predominantly perceived within stereotypical gender roles with an “instinctive knack” for mothering and nurturing. Meanwhile, MDWs of black racial origins are placed at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, typically associated with negative stereotypes, casting them as dangerous, difficult and defiant – images seemingly handed down from the social institution of traditional slavery and enslavement in pre-Islamic Arabia. Notably, the racial prejudice in the care market is closely connected with the economic standing and value of MDWs. On the race-based pricing scale, the Filipina MDWs are rated the most expensive with an annual salary of around SAR35 000, while the less expensive Sri Lankans are paid SAR20 000–25 000 per annum.⁹ Hence the Saudi care market reinforces racial

⁹ At the time of research, the Saudi Riyal (SAR) had an exchange rate of roughly SAR5 = US\$1.

(in)equality as a constituent element in the global care economy.

The distinction between mobile and immobile women, in the sense of the divide between the itinerant MDWs and their stay-behind female relatives, posits a renewed basis on which the category of women is differentiated. The MDWs, as de facto family providers moving back and forth along the migration circuits, and their stay-behind female relatives, as substitute caregivers in the home, differentiate the totality of “particular” women in Sri Lanka, the social underclass, whose shared circumstances constitute a unity in diversity.

The Legal and Political Governance of the Regime

In this section, I discuss the ways in which institutional controls interact and intersect with embedded biases to distinguish and differentiate women’s experiences of migration. I show how the legal and political governance of the Sri Lanka–Saudi migrant care regime has reinforced, reproduced and challenged the dominant representations of MDWs.

MDWs moving to Saudi Arabia

Over the past few decades, women have become an indispensable part of Sri Lanka’s migrant workforce, albeit as low-skilled, low-waged domestic workers. Against the backdrop of the persistently weak socio-economic conditions and, at present, the alarming circumstances of the ongoing economic crisis and the destabilising shock of the global pandemic, money wired home by MDWs has become the financial lifeline for the national economy.

Accordingly, in a gendered migration regime facilitated by a regulated market, Sri Lanka has successfully traded on the “labour of love” at a transnational scale, turning itself into a “labour brokerage state” (Rodriguez, 2008: 794), producing, distributing and regulating MDWs, whose private remittances keep roofs over many heads. On the other hand, as discussed previously in this article, their flight to Saudi Arabia as MDWs is influenced by the transformations in Saudi women’s role and place within the home over the years, where Sri Lankan MDWs as proxy caregivers afford them the privileged operating territory for a state of physical ease, freedom and equality. The move to Saudi Arabia therefore reflects the transformations of femininity in the Global South afforded by neo-liberalism, which, as Dunn (2017: 448–450) defines it, engages shifting relations and power between the state, the market and the society, negotiating the “language” that neo-liberalism should lend itself for the greater good.

Public–private partnership in migrant care

The Sri Lanka–Saudi migrant care regime constitutes a public–private partnership situated in a transnationally regulated market. It takes the form of a collaboration primarily between the state(s), employers, MDWs and private migration brokers, with each party having its own stake in care migration. In this context of a controlled care market, the state sets the texts of policy and regulations, framing “good” practices of care migration. The Family Background Report (FBR) policy represents an instructive example of this. It restricts Sri Lankan women’s mobility for paid work. Introduced in 2013 by the Government of Sri Lanka aimed exclusively at potential MDWs, and further extended in 2015 to cover all categories of potential migrant women workers while exempting migrant men, the FBR is based on the notion that a mother’s absence has persistent negative effects on the stay-behind children’s well-being and development (Gamburd, 2020). For example, based on previous research on Sri Lanka, Jayasuriya and Opeskin (2015: 612) point out that 44 per cent of left-behind children of migrant women have some form of psychopathology,

with over a quarter (29 per cent) of those under five years of age being underweight or severely underweight. Accordingly, the latest policy revision to the FBR, enacted in 2022, prohibits women below 45 years of age with children younger than 2 years¹⁰ from migrating abroad for paid work; it also requires potential migrant women workers with children between 2 and 18 to plan satisfactory child care during their absence (*Ceylon Today*, 2022). The FBR further states that all married women must receive their husband's approval on the FBR papers before they can migrate.

Regarding the FBR's age-based restrictions on MDWs themselves, the minimum age is 21 and the maximum is 55. The FBR, which represents a form of "regulation though responsabilisation" (Joseph et al., 2022: 1), therefore discriminates against potential MDWs in terms of gender, class, age and civil status. As Joseph et al. (2022: 2) further note, the legislation, therefore, provides an ideal instance where institutional constraints coalesce with structural inequalities at a translocal level to exacerbate women's precarity during the course of migration. The FBR exercises a form of regulated violence against women throughout the cycle of their lives, while the prime years of womanhood have been turned into a subject of control, or a locus of economic actions and the lack of them. Being exclusively directed at women while sparing men, it demonstrates an explicit gender bias in public policy, where women's bodies, emotions and sexuality are regulated and exploited for public gain in a characteristically androcentric system of governance.

Ironically, the policy interventions intended to produce a "responsible" migrant domestic workforce have backfired. The FBR has encouraged undocumented migration of Sri Lankan women. This, on the one hand, shows the state's ill-planned and spontaneous reaction to popular gendered narratives (Schwenken, 2018), which has heightened MDWs' precarity during the course of migration. On the other hand, it shows the policy gaps that serve the state's broader political agenda while reproducing existing social hierarchies (Silvey, 2004: 247). Large numbers of Sri Lankan women, caught up in the vicious cycle of poverty and hardship, and unable to access legal channels of migration, have opted for irregular migration, often putting their lives at high risk in the undisclosed transnational labour market with no protection; through such actions, they break free from state-sanctioned regimes, enacting a form of resistance from below (Elias and Louth, 2016: 840).

In the state's "business" of migrant domestic work, licensed private migration brokers have proved to be essential allies. In fact, most of the migration business is performed by brokers located in Sri Lanka, who work in collaboration with similar licenced migration brokers in Saudi Arabia. Operating between multiple sets of state regulations, migration brokers organise and ease MDWs' mobilisation across borders in many different ways. They perform varying roles and functions necessary for migration to take place. These include but are not limited to: scouting for aspiring MDWs, most of whom live in remote parts of the island; finding paid domestic work by contacting and negotiating with employers; organising and facilitating recruitment, selection and placement; and follow-up. This being the case, migration brokers are often held responsible for the precarisation, if not hyper-precariation, of MDWs' work and life during the course of migration (Deshingkar, 2019). What follows are narratives from the field, casting light on migration brokerage as having a controlling influence over the Sri Lanka–Saudi migrant care regime and the experiences and outcomes involved.

MDW-1, quoted above, spoke disappointedly of her local agent's lack of support and empathy, and his attitude towards her family's efforts to bring her back home, when she had been over-kept and exploited for twenty years by her employer:

¹⁰ The initial age limit was 5 years and this has been reduced to 2 in order to increase female departures and thereby to pump more foreign currency into the crisis-hit national economy.

The agent didn't give me any support at all. My family was so worried and concerned about me. When they went to my agent asking for support, he simply told them, 'She'll just stay there and come back when she wants. The place must be good. Probably that's why she does not want to come back'.

MDW-3 was a 31-year-old, Sinhalese Buddhist, first-time MDW, who had migrated to Saudi Arabia in 2015. She was married and had two young children, one under 5 years of age when she migrated. According to the FBR policy at the time, she was not entitled to migrate for paid work because of the age of the child. Nonetheless, she did so with her migration broker's support. During the interview, she described working out the checks and controls on migration under the aegis of her broker:

The broker knew that I was married, but the Bureau [SLBFE] did not. He knew everything: that I had a child under 5. ... I wanted to go to Kuwait, but he decided that I should go to Saudi Arabia instead. ... Also, he bought my air ticket. I did not have to pay anything. I agreed to a monthly salary of Saudi Riyal 900.¹¹

The migration brokers are dealers, if not allies, in MDWs' aspirations for geographical and socio-economic mobility. In this way, they produce, control and manage the migration choices and trajectories of MDWs, their market price, "bodily goodness" and subjectivities. They reproduce structural conditions that exploit MDWs. The brokerage practices thus reinforce the dominant representations of migration brokers as fomenters of precarisation, representations that also portray MDWs as helpless victims of brokers' unscrupulous schemata. On the contrary, the MDWs more fittingly demonstrate themselves as "implicated subjects of precarisation", often liaising with brokers to work around the checks and controls of the border regime. Precarity was thus chosen as much as it was induced.

In a race to the bottom, MDWs are offered the fewest labour regulations and least protection. Migrant domestic work lacks recognition within a decent work framework, with practically no standards and rights at work or fair remuneration, even when it enters the productive sphere. It is work with no limits, task-wise or time-wise. This shows devalorisation of domestic work, both in cultural and financial terms, by associating it with women's naturalised skills to be carers. For example, to date, neither Sri Lanka nor Saudi Arabia has signed the International Labour Organisation's Domestic Workers' Convention 2011 (No. 189) on promoting decent work for domestic workers. Discrimination, domination, violence and power against MDWs have thus become constituent elements in the politics of regime-making.

Conclusions

The Sri Lanka–Saudi migrant care regime produces new and different – in the sense of unconventional – arrangements of gender, care, labour and migration. It differentiates the category of women and women's experiences between women engaged in paid and unpaid domestic work: the former performed by migrant women and the latter by women in the family. Domestic work, paid or unpaid, thus continues to be "women's work", built upon women's "natural" ability as caregivers. The asymmetry is reproduced, acted upon and given value, with wide-ranging

¹¹ In Saudi Arabia the minimum monthly salary of a Sri Lankan MDW is SAR1 250 (an amount equivalent to about US\$250). Price control through minimum salary points to the state's interest in regulating the migrant care regime, which is, nonetheless, acted on by migration brokers at their discretion.

consequences for both maids and mistresses, from subjectivation to personal autonomy; women are therefore not common victims of capitalist patriarchy.

The migrant care regime can be liberating for women: it enables them to outsource some unpaid care responsibilities and participate in paid work outside the home, which changes their opportunities in life. It weakens and alters the traditional barriers impeding women's mobility, both geographical and socio-economic, allowing for new ways of being and doing. Some women form transnational households in which they are significant or the main income providers, thus challenging the gendered myth of the male breadwinner and female homemaker. The new renditions of mothering, be they "transnational hyper-maternalism" (Tungohan, 2013: 41) or mother substitutes, have reconceptualised mothering, motherhood and gendered resistance. In this way, women challenge the sociocultural ways of belonging and actively (re)create homes away from home on foreign soil. They confront the commonly held stereotypes about MDWs at the intersection of various identities as mothers, wives, breadwinners and paid workers, and engage in multiform modes of self-expression and autonomy.

Nevertheless, the migrant care regime and the new arrangements of gender, care, labour and migration are not without their perversions: while they have contributed to a succession of transnational regimes of accumulation (Leonard and Fraser, 2016), they have simultaneously relocated a care crisis from the receiving to the sending end of the transnational care chain. This drain of caregiving discriminates against the category of women not only in terms of the distinctions between maids and mistresses, but also between maids, and even between mobile and immobile women. The divides are thus both public and private. The Sri Lanka–Saudi migrant care regime therefore challenges global care chains in terms of the essentialised global relations of social inequality. The regime illustrates how institutional constraints interact and intersect with structural inequalities to differentiate and distinguish women's experiences and precarity in the complex organisation of reproductive labour. It reflects conflicting relations of power in a racialised discourse of domestic labour, where the colour brown has become a new racial order in the global domestic sector. "Brown" brings new and different power dynamics to the mainstream racial classification of the black maid – white mistress dyad in today's polycentric world order where power and subjectivity are constantly shifting.

Understanding the Sri Lanka–Saudi migrant care regime therefore calls for sensitivity to the local character of neo-liberal globalisation – that is, the formation of a translocal consciousness, acknowledging both the interrelatedness and difference of distinct territorial bodies with more or less fixed boundaries. Sri Lankan MDWs, as agents connecting the two territorial bodies in a context of the many socio-economic and political anxieties, will, in all probability, continue to care for both the Saudi and the Sri Lankan family home.

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